



# In situ preparation of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/bismuth-based oxide nanocomposites with enhanced photocatalytic activity

Wenjie Shan, Yun Hu\*, Zhaogao Bai, Mengmeng Zheng, Chaohai Wei

The Key Lab of Pollution Control and Ecosystem Restoration in Industry Clusters, Ministry of Education, School of Environment and Energy, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510006, PR China

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## ABSTRACT

Different mass percents of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl nanocomposites with intimately contacted interfaces were synthesized in situ by mixing Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles with melamine or guanidine hydrochloride and calcinating at 550 °C for 3 h. The fabricated nanocomposites were well-characterized by various analytical techniques. The results showed that the Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and BiOCl nanosheets grow out from the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> bulk, producing closely contacted interfaces between the Bi oxide component and the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> component. The UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl nanocomposites exhibited increased visible light absorption compared to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> separately. Moreover, the nanocomposites showed significantly enhanced photocatalytic activity for the degradation of dibutyl phthalate and methyl orange under visible light. A proposed photocatalytic mechanism for the enhanced photoactivity of nanocomposites was investigated by scavenging experiments and fluorescent spectroscopy. The increased photocatalytic activity is mainly attributed to the effective separation and transfer of photo-induced carriers in the intimate contact between g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> or BiOCl. The results showed that the different precursors of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> have a significant effect on the composite's structure; i.e., Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> can react to form different bismuth-based oxides depending on the different precursors used to generate g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>. This work demonstrates a convenient way to fabricate visible light responsive materials with potential for environmental remediation.

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## 1. Introduction

Dibutyl phthalate (DBP) is widely used in chemical industry, which is one of the most commonly used plasticizers. It has been detected in water, soils and environmental organisms in recent years. DBP has adverse effects on ecosystems because it can interfere with the endocrine system of humans or animals. Therefore, it is important to find an effective way to minimize the harm of DBP in environment. Semiconductor photocatalysis is a promising environmental remediation technology which can be used to treat the inorganic or organic pollutants in the environment [1,2]. To date, many semiconductor photocatalysts have been studied for use in water splitting and environmental remediation. Among them, TiO<sub>2</sub> is the most widely investigated semiconductor photocatalyst due to its high oxidation ability, good stability, low cost and low toxicity [3,4]. However, practical applications of TiO<sub>2</sub> are quite limited, because it only responds to the ultraviolet (UV) light, lacking any

visible light absorption [5]. Therefore, design and development of visible light responsive semiconductor photocatalysts have been significant research topics in recent years.

Bismuth-based semiconductors (e.g., Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, CaBi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>WO<sub>6</sub>, BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>4</sub>Ti<sub>3</sub>O<sub>12</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and BiOI(O<sub>3</sub>)) have attracted much attention due to their many advantages, such as superior photocatalytic performance under UV and visible light irradiation, unique layered structures and resistance to photocorrosion, chemical stability, low/non-toxicity, and earth abundance [6–10]. Among the various bismuth-based semiconductors, bismuth oxide (Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) with a band gap varying from 2.0 to 3.96 eV is a strong candidate because of its properties that include good photoconductivity and significant visible light response [9–12]. Moreover, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reacts to form other bismuth-based oxides under certain conditions; e.g., Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reacts to form BiOCl when treated with HCl [13] and reacts to form Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> in the presence of carbon sources [14]. However, pure Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> itself has been a bit of a disappointment as a photocatalyst due to the fast recombination of the photo-induced electrons and holes in the material. Much work is centered on methods by which Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> can be transformed into a more efficient visible light photocatalytic material.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [huyun@scut.edu.cn](mailto:huyun@scut.edu.cn) (Y. Hu).

Recently, graphitic carbon nitride ( $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ) has been an object of extensive research interest because of its chemical and photochemical stability, favorable optical absorption with a band gap of 2.7 eV and ease of fabrication from simple precursors (e.g., urea and melamine, among others) through a series of polycondensation reactions without any metal involvement [15–18]. Wang et al. first reported that  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  can be used for hydrogen production from water splitting under visible light illumination [19]. Some researchers have since reported that  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  can be successfully used for photocatalytic degradation of organic pollutants under visible light [15,20]. However, the low efficiency of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  is still a problem, limiting its practical application because of the fast recombination of photo-induced carriers in the material [21]. Many efforts have been undertaken to overcome this problem, including metal or non-metal doping [22,23], nanoporous structure design, morphology control, and coupling with other semiconductors [24–28]. Constructing heterostructures through coupling  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  with other semiconductors is one approach for suppressing the recombination of photo-induced electrons-holes pairs and improving photocatalytic performance [24,29,30].

Therefore, based on the respective energy levels in  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , we have conducted this study into the coupling of the two semiconductors in search of efficient visible light responsive photocatalytic activity for DBP and dye degradations. Also, building on previous researches that have shown that the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  materials prepared by different precursors present significant differences in specific surface area, morphology and photocatalytic activity [30], we have explored the effect of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  prepared from different precursors on the structure and properties of composites of these  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  materials and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$ . Also, based on our results, a possible mechanism for the photocatalytic activity of these nanocomposites is proposed.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no published reports on such work.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Materials

Melamine (Aladdin, AR), guanidine hydrochloride (Aladdin, AR), bismuth nitrate pentahydrate (Sinoharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd, AR), nitric acid (Tianjin Chemical Reagent Factory, AR), sodium hydroxide (Tianjin Chemical Reagent Factory, AR) and methyl orange (Tianjin Chemical Reagent Factory, AR) were used as received. All other reagents used in this work were of AR grade.

### 2.2. Fabrication of materials

#### 2.2.1. Preparation of $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$ powder

The  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  samples were prepared using a precipitation method described in a previous report [32]. Briefly, 10.78 g of  $\text{Bi}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$  was dissolved in 30 mL aqueous solution of  $\text{HNO}_3$  (1.5 M). Then NaOH solution (50% w/v) was added dropwise under vigorous stirring until pH = 13, at which point a yellow precipitate formed. Afterwards, the mixture was heated at 80 °C for 2 h. The obtained yellow precipitate was collected and washed with deionized water and ethanol several times before being dried at 100 °C for 12 h. Finally, the samples were calcined at 300 °C for 2 h using a heating rate of 2 °C/min to form the pure  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  powder.

#### 2.2.2. Preparation of $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and nanocomposites

The  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  was prepared by direct heating of a precursor (melamine or guanidine hydrochloride) to 550 °C for 3 h at a heating rate of 3 °C/min

According to the previous reports, a general preparation method of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ -containing compounds is putting the prepared  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$

into the precursor of another semiconductor, then the semiconductor grows on the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  surface, thus the composite material is obtained [24,25]. In our work, the nanocomposites were synthesized in situ by putting  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  powder into the precursor and heating at 550 °C for 3 h. Typically, a certain amount of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  and 5 g of the precursor were added to absolute ethyl alcohol (the nominal contents of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ : 80, 60 and 40 wt%). A homogeneous suspension was obtained after stirring for 3 h and sonicating for 1 h. Finally, the samples were dried at 60 °C for overnight and next then calcined as described above for pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ . In order to immobilize samples, the photocatalyst films were prepared by the doctor blade coating technique [33].

### 2.3. Characterizations

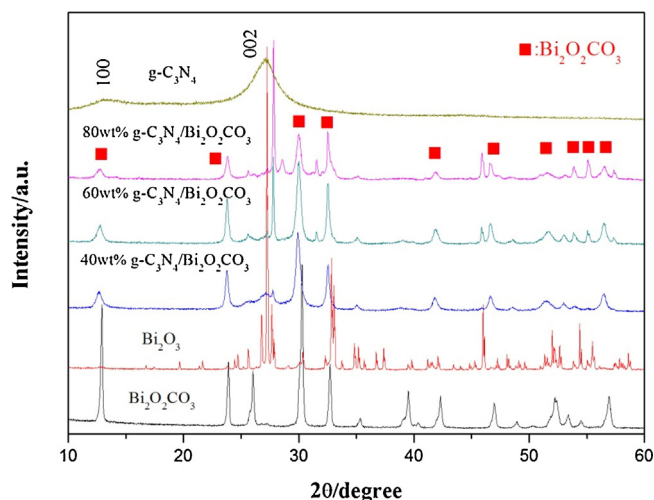
The crystal phase structures of the samples were identified by X-ray diffraction (XRD) (Bruker, D8) using Cu K $\alpha$  ( $\lambda = 0.15418$  nm) radiation. The scan range of  $2\theta$  was 10–80°. The morphology of samples was examined with field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM, Hitachi, S-4800) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM, JEOL, JEM-2010). UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra (DRS) were recorded on a UV–vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu, UV-2550) with  $\text{BaSO}_4$  used as the reflectance standard. The specific surface areas of the calcined photocatalysts were measured on an Autosorb-1C-TCD physical adsorption instrument (Micromeritics, ASAP2010) by  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption at 77 K. The specific surface areas were calculated using the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method. Fourier transform infrared (FT-IR) spectra of solid samples were obtained on the Nicolet-6700 FT-IR spectrometer using KBr pellets. The binding energy was determined by X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS, Thermo Fisher Scientific, ESCALAB 250) with Al K $\alpha$  radiation. The XPS peaks were calibrated with the C 1s peaks derived from a surface contaminating hydrocarbon that had a binding energy of 284.8 eV.

### 2.4. Evaluation of photocatalytic activity

In the evaluation of the photocatalytic activity of the prepared samples, a 500 W halogen tungsten lamp with a 420 nm cut-off filter was used as the visible light source, and the light intensity was 1 mW/cm<sup>2</sup>, which was much weaker than that reported in other literatures [13,14]. Wavelength of incident light was 420–760 nm. DBP and methyl orange (MO) were used as representative pollutants to estimate the photocatalytic activity of the prepared samples, respectively. The photocatalytic degradations of DBP and MO were carried out in a home-made reactor to which a 0.1 g sample of photocatalyst was added to 100 mL of DBP solution (5 mg/L) or MO solution (20 mg/L). Before the irradiation process, the DBP or MO and catalyst suspension was stirred in dark for 30 min to reach adsorption–desorption equilibrium. At given time intervals, the DBP solution was estimated using high performance liquid chromatography after removing the catalysts from the dispersion by magnetic separation, or about 3 mL of the supernate resulting from centrifugation was collected and analyzed for MO using a UV–vis spectrometer. The characteristic absorption peak of MO at 464 nm was used to determine the extent of its degradation. The DBP or MO removal ratio ( $\eta$ ) was calculated as  $\eta (\%) = (1 - C/C_0) \times 100\%$ , where  $C$  and  $C_0$  are the concentrations of DBP or MO after and before reaction, respectively. Total organic carbon (TOC) assays were carried out on a Shimadzu TOC-V<sub>CPN</sub> TOC analyzer.

### 2.5. Detection of reactive species

Different scavengers were subjected into the MO solution before adding the photocatalysts. The test method was similar to the photocatalytic experimental process.



**Fig. 1.** XRD patterns of the prepared g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> photocatalysts.

Also, the produced hydroxyl radical ( $\cdot\text{OH}$ ) in the light irradiation process was measured by photoluminescence (PL) with terephthalic acid (TA) as a probe molecule. Briefly, 0.1 g of sample was added to 100 mL of the TA solution ( $5 \times 10^{-4}$  mol/L) containing with NaOH ( $2 \times 10^{-3}$  mol/L) at room temperature. At 1 h intervals, the centrifuged supernate was measured with a PL spectrophotometer using an excitation wavelength of 420 nm.

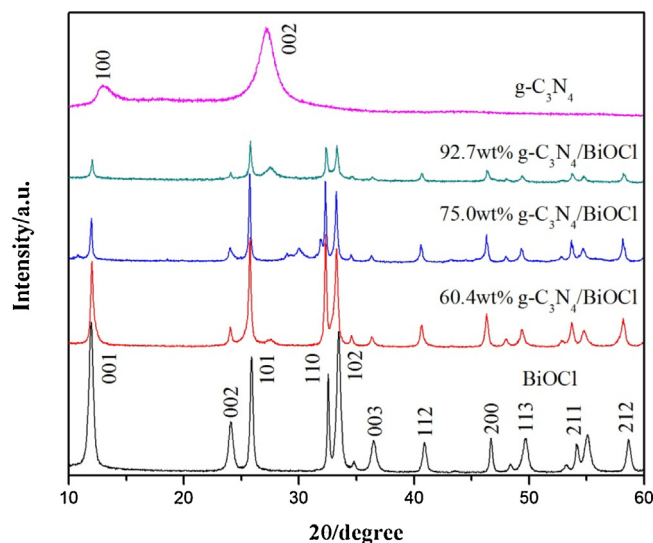
### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. XRD analysis

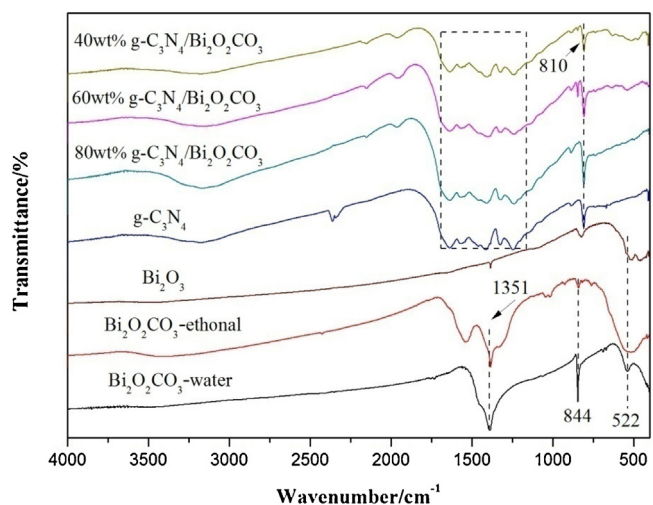
The XRD patterns of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> photocatalysts are shown in Fig. 1. The diffraction peak at  $27.7^\circ$  of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is a characteristic interlayer stacking reflection of conjugated aromatic systems, which can be indexed to (002) diffraction planes [31]. The small peak at around  $13.2^\circ$  is indexed to (100) diffraction planes of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> [34]. The main detectable diffraction peaks of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> can be indexed to the tetragonal phase according to the PDF card (JCPDS 41-1488) [35]. Only the monoclinic phase of crystalline  $\alpha$ -Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> is present in the prepared sample, which consistent with the result of JCPDS 71-2274 [36]. The sharp, well-separated diffraction peaks indicate that the samples were well-crystallized.

In the composite g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> samples, the diffraction peaks of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> were observed, while the diffraction peaks of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were reduced. These results indicate that the Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> was formed after the mixture of melamine and Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were calcined at  $550^\circ\text{C}$ . Taking into consideration the fact that Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> can be transformed to Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> in a CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere and that melamine may produce large amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> gas during the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> formation at high temperature, we infer that Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reacted with CO<sub>2</sub> to form Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>. Also, the XRD peak intensity of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> increased and the diffraction peaks appeared to be sharpen as the amount of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> input is increased. In addition, some small XRD peaks of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> were observed in the composites, suggesting that there were small amount of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> residues in the composites.

A g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite was obtained when a mixture of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and guanidine hydrochloride (CH<sub>5</sub>N<sub>3</sub>·HCl) were calcined at  $550^\circ\text{C}$ . Previous studies have shown that in the presence of HCl, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> can react to form BiOCl [13]. The XRD results of that composite are shown in Fig. 2, providing evidence of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl, suggesting that the Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reacted with HCl produced by CH<sub>5</sub>N<sub>3</sub>·HCl during the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> formation.



**Fig. 2.** XRD patterns of different catalysts.



**Fig. 3.** FT-IR spectra of the prepared g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> samples.

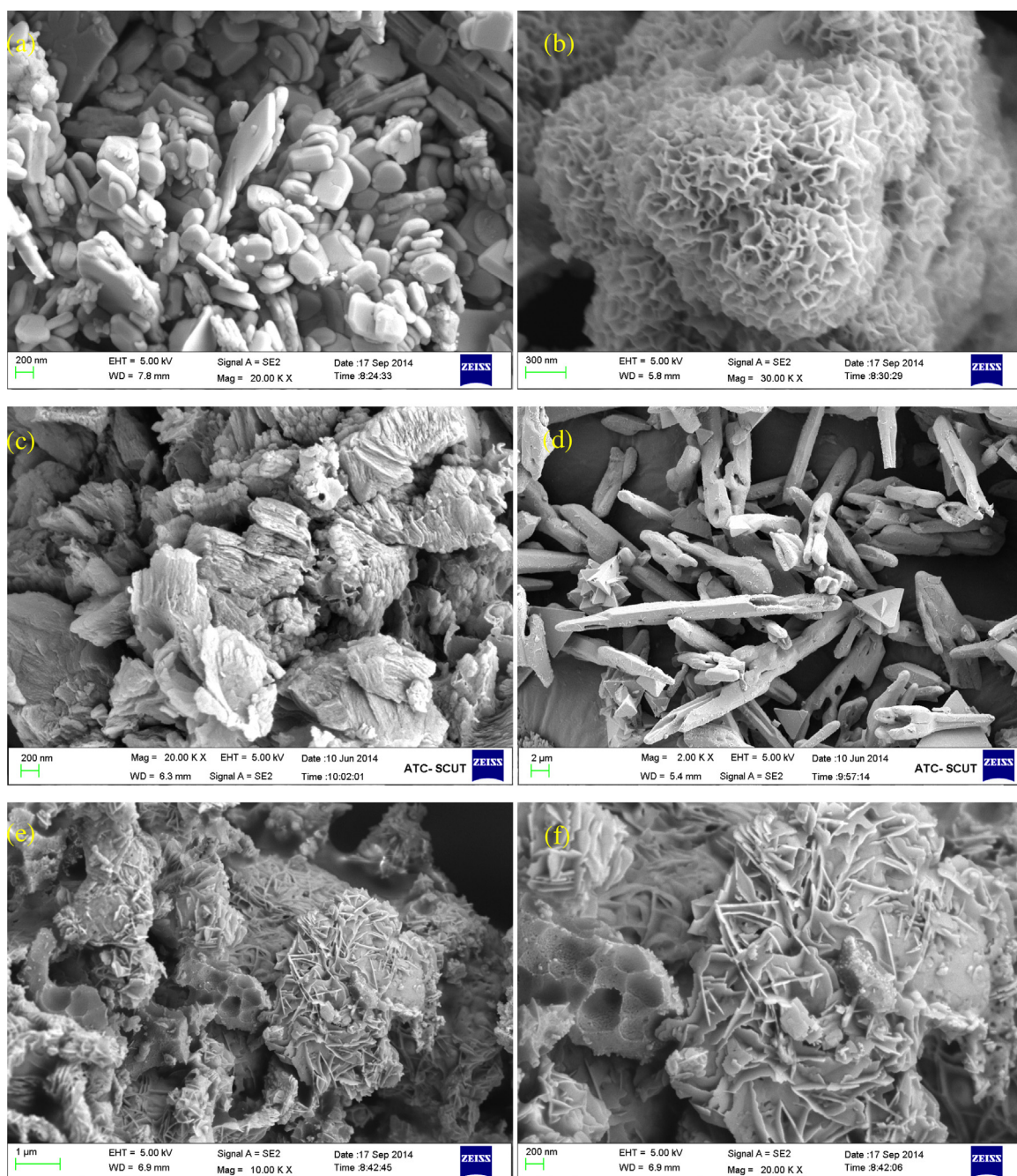
In neither Figs. 1 nor 2 were there any obvious diffraction peaks of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> observed in the composites, which may be explained by the fact that the peaks were concealed by other diffraction peaks, such as Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and BiOCl.

#### 3.2. FT-IR spectra analysis

Fig. 3 shows the FT-IR spectra of the prepared g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> samples. The peak at around  $522\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is assigned to the stretching mode of Bi–O groups in Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> or Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>. The peaks at  $1351$  and  $844\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are ascribed to the stretching modes of CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup> groups in Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> [37]. In the FT-IR spectra of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, the peaks in the region from  $1200$  to  $1600\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are ascribed to the typical stretching vibrations of CN heterocycles [34]. These peaks are also present in the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> composites, suggesting that g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> exists in the composites. The peak at  $810\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is attributed to the characteristic breathing mode of s-triazine [26], which increases with the increase of the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> content.

From the results of XRD and FT-IR analyses, it can be seen that Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> reacted to form different bismuth-based oxides in the presence of different g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> precursors; i.e., Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> formed Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>





**Fig. 4.** FE-SEM images of (a)  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -water; (b)  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol; (c)  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ; (d)  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  and (e)  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ ; (f) magnified FE-SEM image of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ .

and  $\text{BiOCl}$  in the presence of melamine and guanidine hydrochloride, respectively.

### 3.3. Morphological analysis

The morphology and nanostructure of the prepared samples were characterized by FE-SEM and TEM measurements. Fig. 4a and b shows the morphologies of two different samples of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  prepared using water and ethanol as the solvent, respectively. The  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -water sample displayed a flake-like nanostructure with a thickness of about 50–100 nm and the size of several hundred nanometers. In contrast, the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol sample exhibited a flower-like microsphere which consisted of thin flakes, indicating that the microstructure is affected by using different solvents.

Fig. 4c shows that the pure  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  had a typically aggregated morphology with a layered structure and a large size. Interestingly, some thin flakes sprouted from the blocky structure in the composites (Fig. 3e and f) after the mixture of melamine and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  was calcined, while the rod-like structures of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  (Fig. 3d) cannot be observed. A similar phenomenon occurred in the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  composite prepared by heating the mixture of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CH}_5\text{N}_3\cdot\text{HCl}$ , as shown in Fig. S1. These results suggest that the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  flower-like thin flakes were formed in the composites due to the transformation of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  in the presence of  $\text{CO}_2$ , which are consistent with the XRD and FT-IR measurements.

In summary, SEM images show that the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  composites can be synthesized by the in-situ calcina-

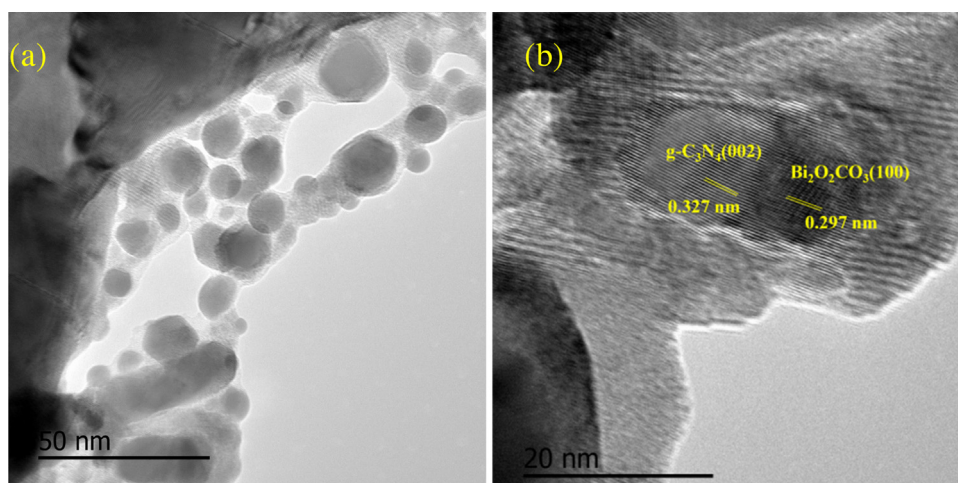


Fig. 5. (a) TEM image and (b) HR-TEM image of the 60 wt%  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  composite.

**Table 1**

The BET specific surface area of different catalysts.

Samples	Specific surface area ( $\text{m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$ )
$g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$	6.71
$\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$	8.95
$\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$	15.35
$\text{BiOCl}$	12.34
$g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$	25.01
$g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$	25.50

tion method with the result that the fundamental components of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $\text{BiOCl}$ , respectively, are in close contact.

Fig. 5 shows the TEM images of 60 wt%  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  composites. As can be seen from Fig. 5a, the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  contacts closely with the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ; i.e., almost no  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  thin flakes can be observed outside the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanosheets. The HR-TEM in Fig. 5b clearly shows the lattice fringes of 0.327 nm that are ascribed to the (002) plane of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and the lattice fringes of 0.297 nm that correspond to the (100) plane of tetragonal  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  [38].

Therefore, the SEM and TEM results show that the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  composite was successfully prepared by in-situ growth mechanism and that the components are in close contact. Taking into consideration that this close contact between the two components in composite materials should be beneficial to the transfer of photo-induced carriers [39], the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  nanocomposites prepared by the in-situ synthesis method are expected to show enhanced photocatalytic activity.

### 3.4. BET analysis

Table 1 presents the specific surface area of the samples. Compared with the pure catalysts, the composite photocatalysts  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  showed larger specific surface areas, which were 25.01 and  $25.50 \text{ m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$ , respectively. This was caused by the gas generated during the thermal polymerization process.

### 3.5. XPS analysis

XPS analysis was performed to investigate the chemical composition of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  composites. The high resolution spectra of Bi 4f, O 1s, C 1s and N 1s are shown in Fig. 6. The binding energy for C1s peak at 284.8 eV was used as a reference. The binding energies at 164.01 and 158.7 eV of pure  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  are attributed to  $\text{Bi}4f_{5/2}$  and  $\text{Bi}4f_{7/2}$ , respectively [36]. However, the binding energies

shifted to 164.81 and 159.49 eV in the composites, corresponding to the  $\text{Bi}4f_{5/2}$  and  $\text{Bi}4f_{7/2}$  of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ , respectively [40]. Similarly, the peaks of O 1s were also changed, and the binding energy was changed from 529.26 eV to 530.61 eV, which is attributed to the  $[\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2]^{2+}$  in  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  [40]. The peak at 530.51 eV is characteristic of Bi–O binding energy in  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$ , and the peak at 531.62 eV is attributed to Bi–O in  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ . These results show that the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  was formed in the composites.

In Fig. 6c, the peaks of C 1s binding energies at 284.81 and 288.39 eV can be assigned to carbon atoms (C–C bonding) in a carbon environment; i.e., amorphous carbon adsorbed on the surface and carbon atoms bond in N-containing aromatic rings (N–C=N), respectively. Fig. 6d is a high resolution spectrum of N 1s. Three peaks can be distinguished at 398.80, 399.89 and 401.33 eV. The binding energies at 398.80 and 401.33 eV belong to  $\text{sp}^2$ -bonded N in the triazine rings (C–N=C) and amino groups (C–N–H), respectively [41]. The peak at 399.89 eV was assigned to the tertiary nitrogen in the form of N–(C)<sub>3</sub> groups. The tiny peak at 404.8 eV was ascribed to the charging effects or positive charge localization in the heterocycles [41–44].

In short, the XPS results indicated that both  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  with graphite-like  $\text{sp}^2$ -bonded structure and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  existed in the composite. The shifts of the peaks in the composite, compared with those in the pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , were attributed to the interaction between  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ .

### 3.6. UV–vis DRS analysis

The UV–vis DRS spectra of the synthesized samples are shown in Fig. 7. The  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  exhibited absorption edges at around 460 nm in the visible range. The optical absorption band of the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -water sample presented a steep absorption edge only in the UV region. However, the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol sample with its flower-like structure exhibited an enhanced absorption in the visible region. These data show that the optical absorption and band gap energy are affected by the morphology of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ , which is consistent with previous reports [45]. With the increase of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  dosage, the absorption edge of the composites showed a red shift. That is, with increasing  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  content, the composites had a wider range of UV–vis absorption close to that of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol, suggesting that the structure and photochemical property of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  in  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  is similar to that of the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol sample. This conjecture is consistent with the SEM results. Moreover, the color of the films fixed on the glass gradually changed from pale yellow to brown with the increase in the  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  content, as shown



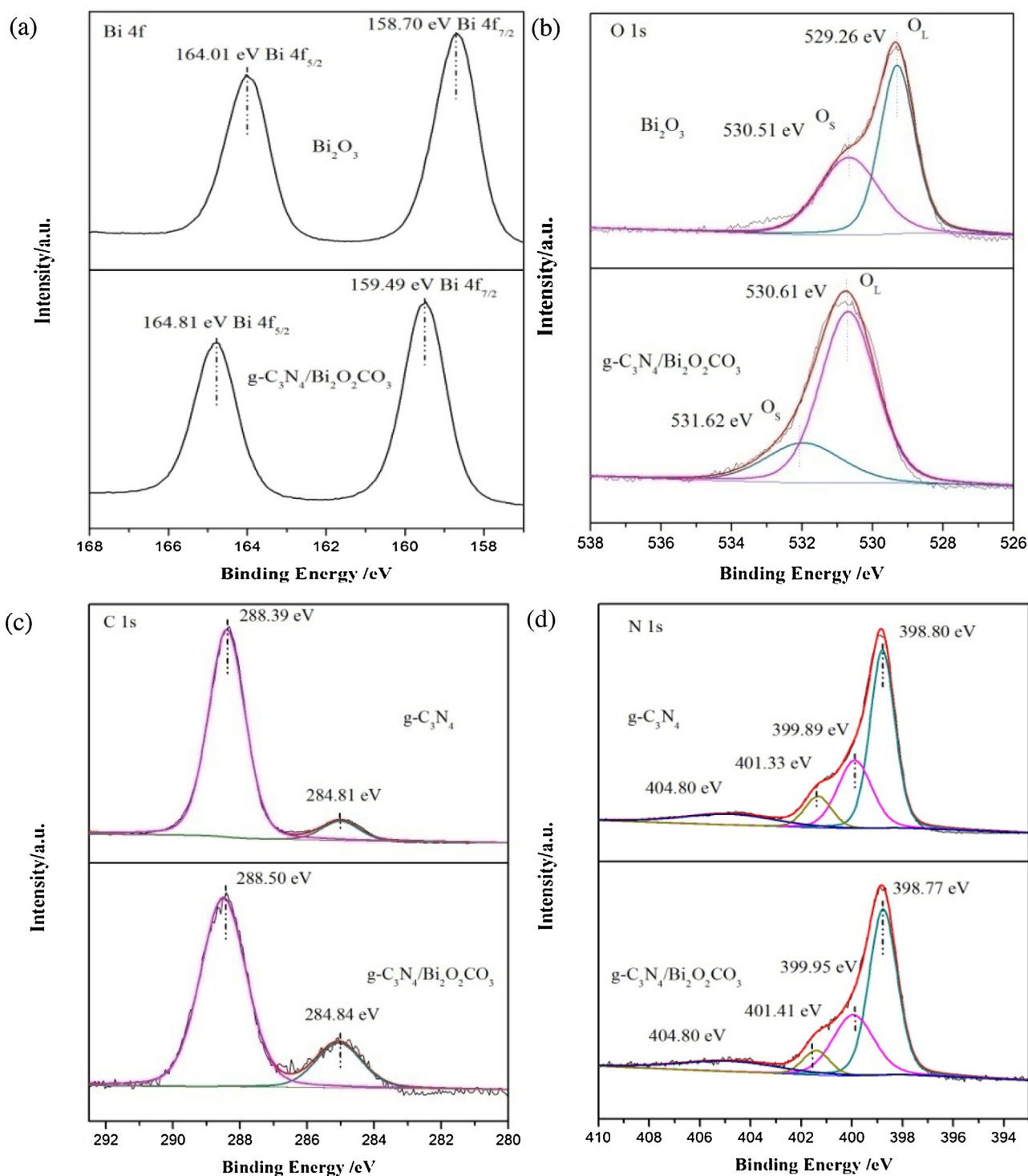


Fig. 6. High resolution XPS spectra of (a) Bi 4f, (b) O 1s, (c) C 1s and (d) N 1s.

in Fig. 7a. Similarly, the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  nanocomposite also had a wide range of visible light response, as shown in Fig. S2.

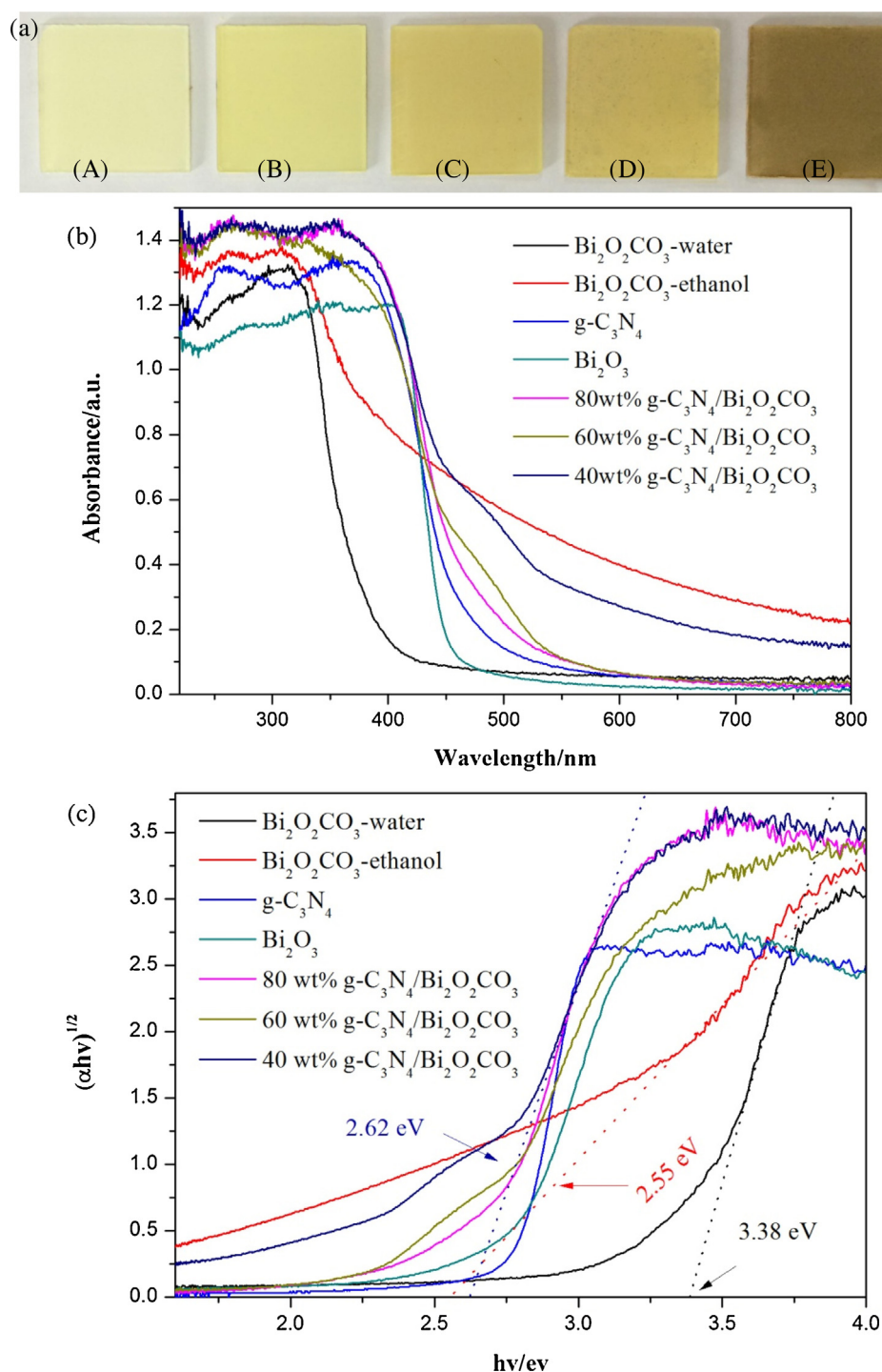
In general, for a crystalline semiconductor, the optical absorption band edge can be estimated according to the formula  $(\alpha h\nu)^n = A(h\nu - E_g)$ , where  $\alpha$ ,  $h$ ,  $\nu$ ,  $A$  and  $E_g$  are, respectively, the absorption coefficient, Planck's constant, light frequency, a constant and band gap [46]. The value of  $n$  is 2 for the direct transition and 1/2 for the indirect transition. For  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ , the value of  $n$  is 1/2 for the indirect transition, thus the band gaps were estimated to be about 3.38 eV for  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -water and 2.55 eV for  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ -ethanol, as

shown in Fig. 6c. By similar analysis, the optical band gap for  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  was estimated to be about 2.72 eV.

In addition, the potentials of the valence band (VB) and conduction band (CB) for  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  crystal can be calculated according to the two formulas which are proposed by Butler and Ginley:

$$E_{VB} = X - E^e + 0.5 E_g$$

$$E_{CB} = E_{VB} - E_g,$$

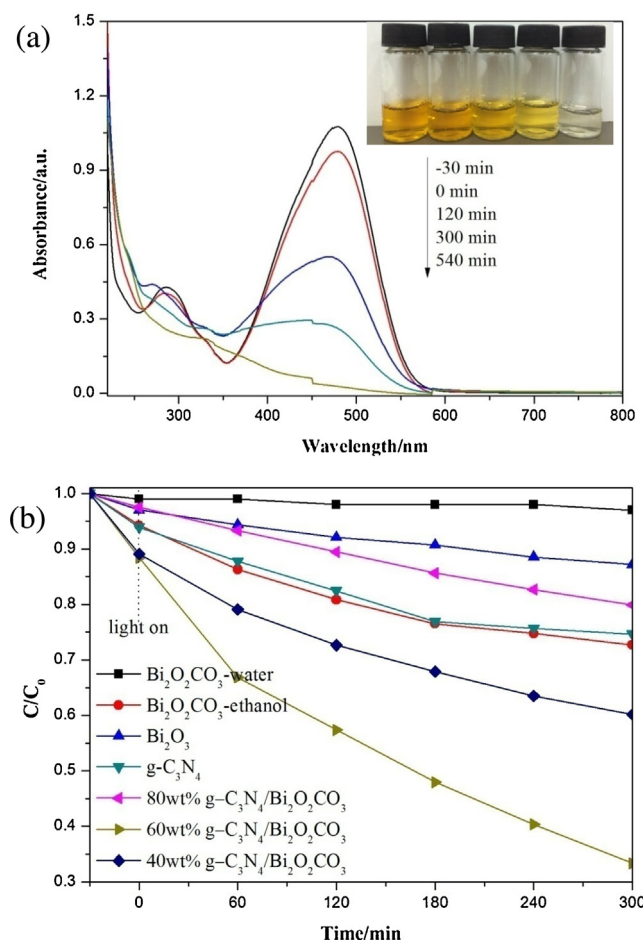


**Fig. 7.** (a) Photographs of the thin films: (A)  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$ , (B)  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , (C) 80 wt%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3\text{CO}_3$ , (D) 60 wt%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3\text{CO}_3$ , (E) 40 wt%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3\text{CO}_3$ ; (b) UV-vis spectra of different catalysts; (c)  $(\alpha h\nu)^{1/2}$  vs.  $h\nu$  curves of different catalysts. (For interpretation of the references to color in the text, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

where  $E^e$  is the energy of free electrons on the hydrogen scale (that is, 4.5 eV);  $X$  is the absolute electronegativity of the corresponding semiconductor material; and  $E_{\text{VB}}$ ,  $E_{\text{CB}}$  and  $E_g$  are the VB potential, CB potential and band gap of semiconductor material, respectively [47]. The  $X$  value of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3\text{CO}_3$  was calculated to be 6.36 eV. Based on the above formulas, the VB potential and CB potential of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3\text{CO}_3$  were calculated to be 3.13 eV and 0.58 eV, respectively.

### 3.7. Photocatalytic performance

The photocatalytic activities of the samples were evaluated by photocatalytic degradation of a MO solution under visible light. As shown in Fig. 8a, the characteristic absorption band of MO at 464 nm decreased significantly with increasing irradiation time, indicating the destruction of the conjugated structure [48]. The reduction in the absorption band at 270 nm was attributed to the ring cleavage reaction of the benzene ring. These absorption peaks disappeared



**Fig. 8.** (a) UV-vis spectrum changes of the MO degradation by the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> catalyst; (b) the photocatalytic degradation of MO by different g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> catalysts under visible light.

completely after irradiation for 9 h, reflecting the complete decolorization of the MO solution as shown in the inset of Fig. 8a.

For simplicity, the absorption of MO at 464 nm was used to estimate the degradation of MO, as shown in Fig. 8b. The blank (i.e., no photocatalyst) demonstrated that MO was stable under visible light irradiation for 300 min (shown in Fig. S3). The ability of the catalysts to adsorb MO (and thereby falsely imply degradation) was investigated in the dark for 60 min before the light was turned on. It can be seen that the MO and catalyst suspension reached absorption-desorption equilibrium at 30 min (Fig. S3). The results showed that only small amount of organic pollutants were adsorbed on the composite, indicating that the catalysts were poor adsorbents for MO.

The pure g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and pure Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> exhibited generally low photocatalytic activity, with only 24% and 13% MO degradation, respectively, after visible light irradiation for 300 min. Further, only 28% of MO was eliminated by Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>-ethanol under the same conditions. This low performance is likely due to the fast recombination of photo-induced electrons and holes in the single semiconductor. However, these three photocatalysts showed higher activities than Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>-water, due to their visible light response.

Among the nanocomposites, the highest activity was obtained with the 60 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> sample, with which almost 70% of MO was degraded within 300 min. A pseudo-first order kinetic equation  $-\ln(C/C_0) = kt$  produced a good fit to the experimental data, as shown in Fig. S4. The results indicated that the rate constant  $k$  was  $0.00249 \text{ min}^{-1}$ , which is about 6.3 and 2.8 times

greater than the rate constants displayed by pure g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> catalysts, respectively. G-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl also showed greater photocatalytic activity than the pure g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> or Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> samples, as shown in Figs. 9 and S5. The enhanced photocatalytic activity of the composites may be due to the change of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> into Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> or BiOCl in the presence of different g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> precursors during the synthesis process. In addition, the energy bands of generated Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> or BiOCl are well matched with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.

Moreover, the degradation of DBP using different catalysts under visible light illumination was carried out. As shown in Fig. 10, almost 60% of DBP was degraded within 300 min, which was more efficient in the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> or g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl dispersion as compared to any single catalyst. This is similar with the results of MO degradation. The results indicated that the nanocomposites can effectively remove organic pollutants. In order to further assess the mineralization of DBP in water, TOC was monitored during the reaction process. Fig. S6 depicts the TOC removal after 4 h of visible light irradiation with the composite photocatalysts. The mineralization rates of organic carbon in MO and DBP were 48% and 43% on 75 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl, while those were 45% and 38% on 60 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, respectively. Compared to the degradation rate of MO and DBP, it can be seen that most of the organic molecules were mineralized in the photocatalytic degradation process.

The stability of composite photocatalyst was investigated by performing recycle experiments with 75 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl catalyst under visible light irradiation (Fig. 11). After four recycles, the photocatalytic activity did not show any obvious decay, demonstrating the high stability of the composite.



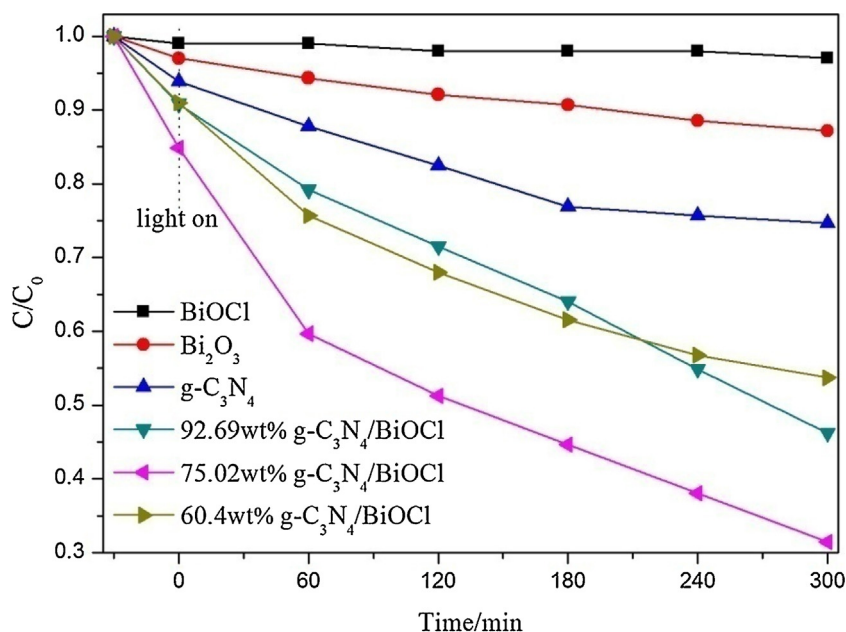


Fig. 9. The photocatalytic degradation of MO by different g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl catalysts under visible light.

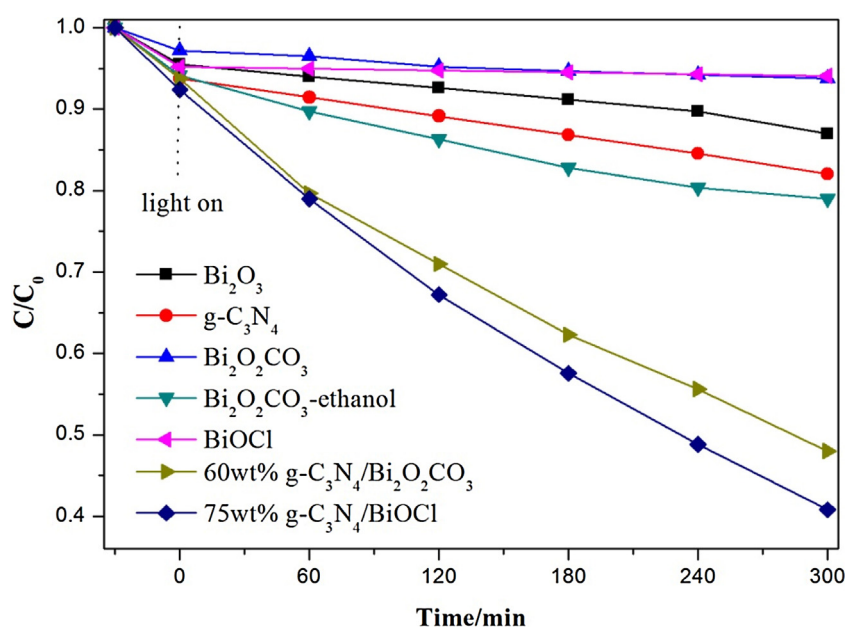


Fig. 10. The photocatalytic degradation of DBP by different photocatalysts under visible light.

Based on these experimental results, it can be inferred that the interfacial charge transfer between the two materials with the well-matched band structures and the closely contacted interfaces, which could enhance the separation of photo-induced carriers, are the main reasons for the enhanced photocatalytic activity.

### 3.8. Proposed photocatalytic mechanism

It is important to investigate the active species in the photocatalytic process in order to understand the mechanism of photocatalysis. In general, many active species, including  $\cdot\text{OH}$ ,  $\text{h}^+$  and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ , can be expected to exist in a photocatalytic process. In this case, isopropanol (IPA), triethanolamine (TEOA) and  $\text{N}_2$  purging were used as  $\cdot\text{OH}$ ,  $\text{h}^+$  and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  scavengers, respectively. As shown in Fig. 12, the photocatalytic activity of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>

nanocomposite was greatly suppressed after the addition of TEOA, suggesting that  $\text{h}^+$  was the main reactive species. Similarly, the obvious decrease in the photocatalytic activity observed by the addition of IPA and  $\text{N}_2$  purging, respectively, suggested that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  play an important role in the reaction process, too. Formation of  $\cdot\text{OH}$  in the reaction process can be measured by photoluminescence (PL) with the terephthalic acid (TA) as a probe molecule [49]. As shown in Fig. 13a, the intensity of PL spectra of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> gradually increased with the illumination time, indicating the formation of  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals. For g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, the CB potential ( $-1.15\text{ eV}$ ) is more negative than the standard redox potential of  $\text{O}_2/\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  ( $-0.046\text{ eV}$ ), so the electrons in the CB can reduce the  $\text{O}_2$  to  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  and further react to form  $\cdot\text{OH}$ . Also, the VB potential ( $+1.57\text{ eV}$ ) is more negative than the standard redox potentials of  $\cdot\text{OH}/\text{OH}^-$  ( $+1.99\text{ eV}$ ), so the holes on the VB cannot oxidize the  $\text{OH}^-$  to  $\cdot\text{OH}$ . These data

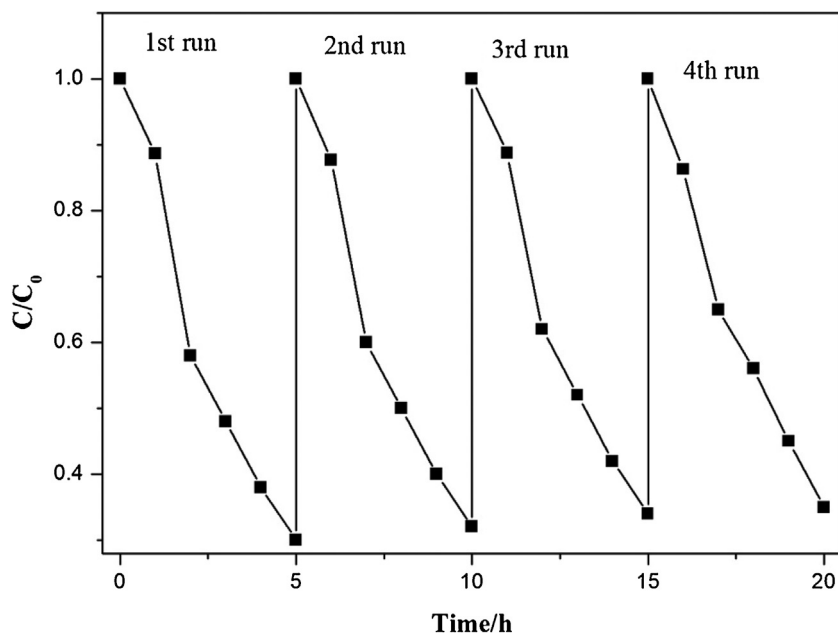


Fig. 11. Cycles of MO degradation over 75 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/BiOCl under visible light irradiation.

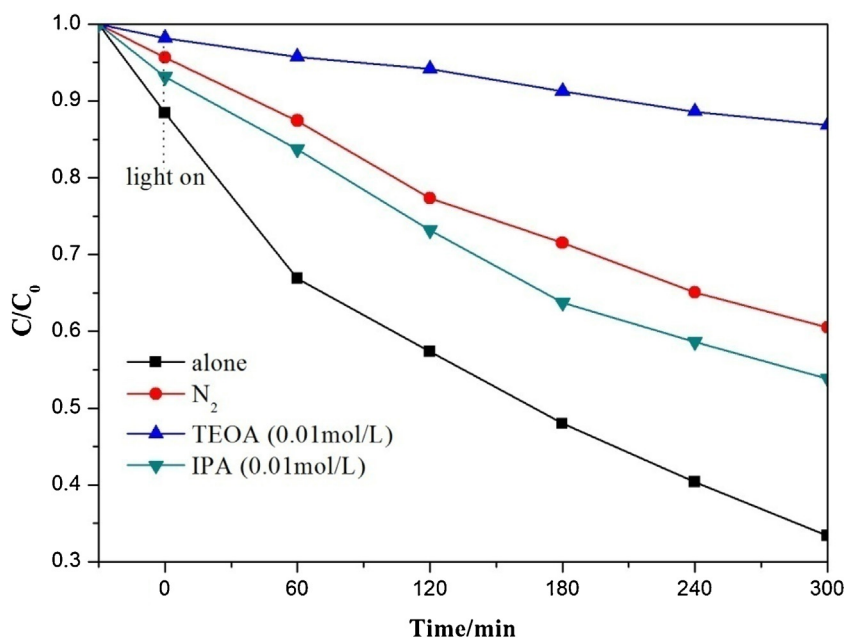


Fig. 12. Photocatalytic degradation of MO over 60 wt% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> as well as the addition of different scavengers.

suggest that  $\cdot\text{OH}$  cannot be generated from the VB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, but it can be formed from the electrons on the CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> [50]. According to an earlier report, the photo-induced holes in Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> cannot oxidize OH<sup>-</sup> to form  $\cdot\text{OH}$ , since the oxidation potential of holes in Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> depends on the standard redox potential of Bi<sup>IV</sup>/Bi<sup>III</sup> (1.59 eV), which is more negative than the standard redox potential of  $\cdot\text{OH}/\text{OH}^-$  (1.99 eV) [51]. Actually, the  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals were not formed in the Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> system because no change of PL intensity is observed with increased irradiation time, as shown in Fig. 13b.

For the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> system, if the excited electrons in CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> transfer to Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, the intensity of PL spectra of the composite would be lower than that of pure g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>. As expected, it was found that the PL intensity of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> decreased compared to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 13c). This result indicates that fewer

$\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals were formed in the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> system and the excited electrons in CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> transferred to the CB of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> based on the principle of thermodynamics, since the CB potential of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> (-1.15 eV) is more negative than that of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> (0.58 eV).

Based on these experimental and theoretical calculation results, a possible photocatalytic mechanism for degradation of MO by the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> nanocomposites is proposed and is depicted in the schematic diagram in Fig. 14. Because of the well-matched band structure of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>/Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and closely contacted interface, the excited electrons in the CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> transfer to the CB of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, the holes in the VB of Bi<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> transfer to the VB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, under visible light irradiation. The holes in the VB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> can decompose MO directly, and the residual electrons in the CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> can reduce O<sub>2</sub> to form  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  or react with OH<sup>-</sup> to form  $\cdot\text{OH}$  radicals,

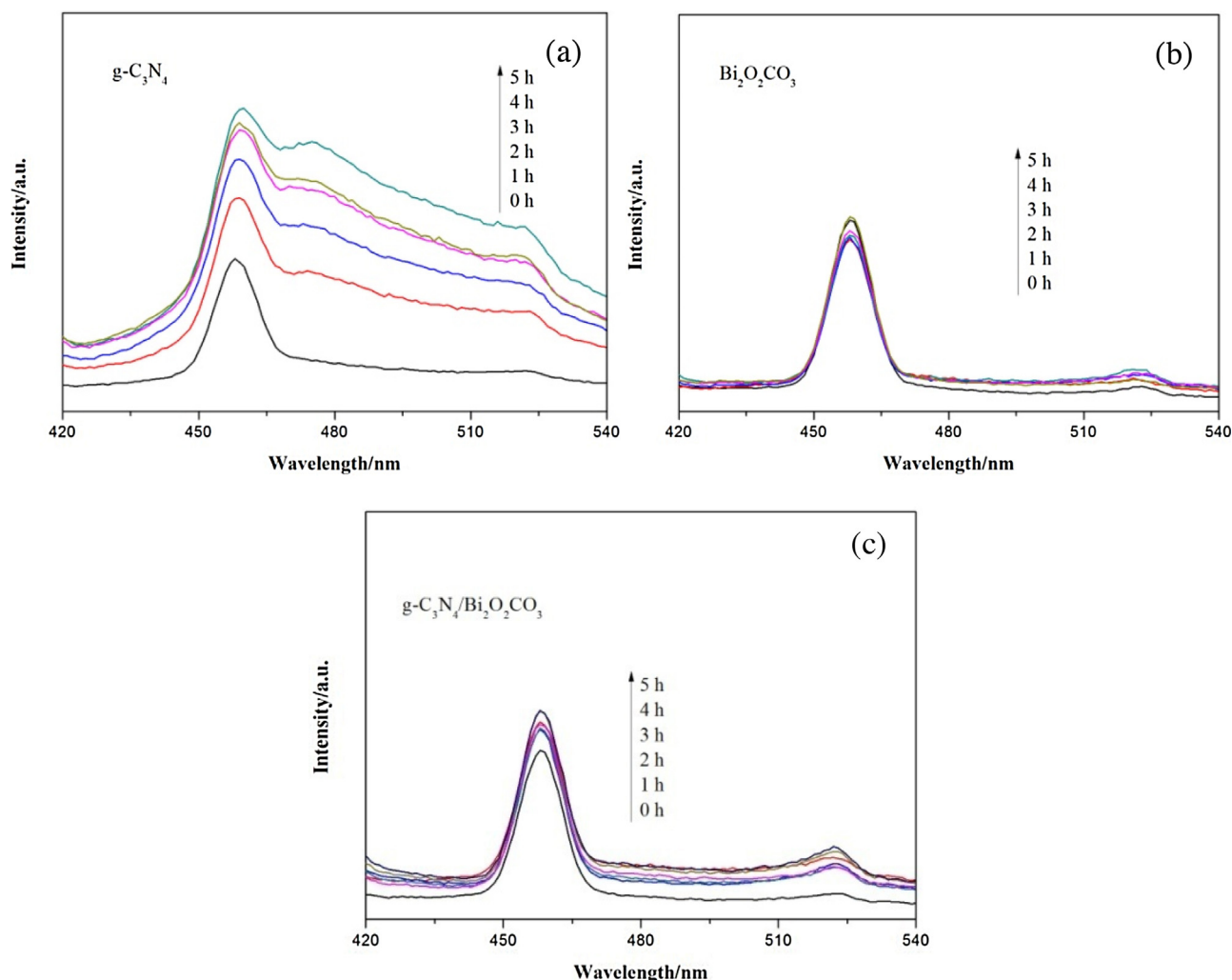


Fig. 13. PL spectra of (a)  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , (b)  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and (c)  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  in TA solution under visible light irradiation.

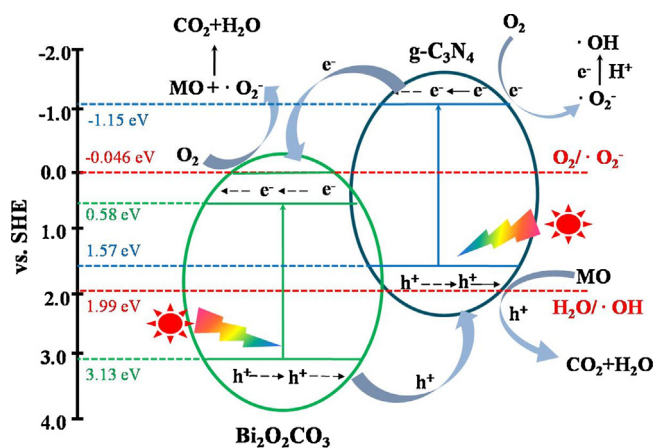


Fig. 14. The photocatalytic degradation mechanism of MO over  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$ .

both of which can oxidize MO. The photogenerated electrons of the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  transfer to a higher CB of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  (potential more negative than  $\text{O}_2/\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  ( $-0.046\text{ eV}$ )) whose electrons can reduce  $\text{O}_2$  to  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  and further decompose MO. This phenomenon was reported in the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOBr}$  [51]. Thus, the photo-induced electrons and holes were separated effectively, and the surface electrons and holes could carry out the reduction and oxidation reactions, respectively.

In summary, the enhanced photocatalytic activity of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  was ascribed to the effective separation of photo-induced electrons and holes, facilitated by the closely connected interface. Similarly, the enhanced photocatalytic activity based on the above reasons can be observed in the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  system which is prepared by the in-situ crystal growth mechanism, as shown in Fig. S5.

These data further support the conclusion that the in-situ growth mechanism is an effective method to design high-efficiency materials for environmental remediation.

#### 4. Conclusions

$\text{G-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{BiOCl}$  nanocomposites were successfully synthesized using a simple in-situ crystal composite growth mechanism by heating the mixture of  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_3$  and melamine or guanidine hydrochloride. The prepared nanocomposites exhibited enhanced photocatalytic activities under visible light. The effective separation of photo-induced carriers and the intimately contacted interface of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{Bi}_2\text{O}_2\text{CO}_3$  or  $\text{BiOCl}$  are the main reasons for the significant enhancements.

This work shows that the different precursors of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  significantly affect the composites in regard to the morphology, visible light response and photocatalytic activity. In so doing, the study demonstrates a new strategy for the design and development of high-efficiency visible-light-driven photocatalysts with potential



applications for environmental remediation and clean energy production.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2016.01.058>.

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